

## West Wealthy Beautification Boxes

### **Finding Our Connections Back To Each Other Through Nature**

Community connection for business owner Casey Kornoelje is an effort that involves engaging others and the environment. He says being able to engage with the environment can provide a blueprint of how we can learn to treat our neighbors.

Through the Grand Rapids Neighborhood Match Fund, he saw an opportunity to engage the community with the river and the surrounding environment through what he likes to call Habitat Boxes. These are wooden boxes made specifically for birds, bats, and pollinators.

“This part of the west side has a deep history and often, neighbors feel disconnected from the river because of the former city dump site, extensive chain link fencing and high traffic/truck traffic filled streets,” he said.

Being able to connect with the land, Casey says, allows individuals to understand its history and the value of the resources it provides for us to live sustainably here.

“The habitat boxes are a small way for people to realize they can take a part in providing a home for other members of our community (birds, bees, and bats) to thrive and to coexist with us,” he said.

The pollinator box has various holes and slats, and nooks and crannies, basically for bees and pollinators, butterflies, and bats. And then the birdhouses are made specially for small birds to nest in similarly with the bat ones.

For Casey the boxes provided an opportunity for connection to nature and habitat while promoting art and creativity.

“As we learn and provide for nature and habitat, we also learn and provide for ourselves and our neighbors,” he explained.

Neighbors across the area received the boxes, paint supplies and materials with examples of the ways the habitat boxes can create a welcoming environment for others. Building connections through art and education, the habitat boxes provided John Ball Zoo residents the chance to interact with their work and feel a stronger connection to it, their community and themselves.

“By placing the habitat box in nature, on “city” land, neighbors got to feel empowered and reclaim their voices in this place we all call home,” Casey said.

On a sunny afternoon in the Spring, Casey gathered the residents involved along Kent Trail to hang the boxes with its creators. The bat boxes were hung 10 feet above ground on trees and surrounding structures.

“So those have been hung, and they’re installed in nature right now and building up the biodiversity in this area,” he said.

A total of 100 habitat boxes were placed across the John Ball Zoo neighborhood.

“The Neighborhood Match Fund contract covered 60, but we were willing to kind of go above and beyond because we had such overwhelming interest from the community,” Casey added.

He says some people even placed these habitat boxes in front of their homes so that they could see the ways these would be providing homes for the area’s animals.

It’s his hope to be able to continue to provide opportunities for the area’s residents to connect in meaningful ways with each other and their environment.